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UMaine Research Provides Measure for Early Literacy Performance: Maine First Graders Performing Well

ORONO, Maine -- Maine children are entering and leaving first grade ready to take advantage of further instruction in reading and writing, according to researchers at the University of Maine College of Education. Performance data from more than a thousand first graders indicate that, on the average, Maine children are performing well within the range of expected literacy competencies.

In addition, most first graders' scores on the Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement reflect that they have acquired the fundamental building blocks of literacy - skills that will enable them to learn more about reading and writing every time they engage in these activities.

The study, "Literacy Learning: Are Maine First Graders Meeting Our Expectations?," represents the first attempt to identify statewide norms, providing a benchmark for Maine schools to measure the performance of their youngest students and assess the effectiveness of their kindergarten and first grade curriculum, according to researchers Paula Moore and Anne Rhodes-Kline.

Sponsored by the State Department of Education, the study was conducted in cooperation with schools that have implemented the Reading Recovery early intervention program and use the observation survey to assess the progress of young children and identify those who are at risk of not learning to read. The survey was individually administered by teachers to more than one thousand first graders in 197 Maine elementary schools during the fall and spring of the 1995-96 school year. Students in the sample included children enrolled in Reading Recovery, on the waiting list for the program, and a random sample of those considered not to be at risk. Schools participating in the study collected the data as part of the state evaluation of the Reading Recovery program.

The scores validate that the largest group of Maine first graders are reading at first grade level or above, but also highlight the importance of early intervention for children not meeting the targeted standards, says Moore, director of UMaine's Center for Early Literacy.

The survey scores were standardized using stanines, which range from 1 to 9 with 4 to 6 being average. The stanine scoring system gives schools the ability to determine how students are doing in relation to others and provides a broad average range to fairly reflect the skill levels of the vast majority of children entering and exiting first grade.

All children enter school ready to learn something, but learning to read and write is easier for those who have had rich preschool literacy experiences, the researchers say. The challenge for schools, they emphasize, is to be ready to assess and meet the needs of children with a diversity of skill levels and opportunities.

In administering the survey, teachers used standardized observation procedures for systematically recording the basic reading and writing competencies, indicated by research and conventional wisdom, that make it easier for a child to take advantage of first grade instruction. Teachers and researchers agree on the following literacy skills as indicators of successful literacy learning for entering first graders.

Fundamental prerequisites for first grade success

- Understanding how written language works, as a backdrop for learning and making sense out of initial reading instruction
- Understanding early reading strategies such as where to start reading on one or two lines of text, how to read left to right, and how to use pictures and repetitive sentence structure as clues for anticipating what comes next
- Knowing the alphabet and being able to discriminate between letters
- Recognizing words and having a small bank of familiar words as anchors in a sea of print
- Having the opportunity to see adults write, to experiment themselves with a variety of tools for creating print, and encouragement to record messages important to them, all emphasizing that the purpose of text is to be understood.

Teachers' expectations for reading and writing achievement at the end of first grade are similar across states even though there's no national early literacy curriculum. The following indicators of achievement are based on these expectations and research.

Students who are likely to succeed in second grade

- Have global concepts about the form and functions of print and specific knowledge about punctuation, about vocabulary for describing parts of print, such as letter, word, sentence, and can detect errors in word and sentence order
- Read stories with multiple lines of text, with varied and sophisticated themes, and that use literary language such as "In a land far, far away"
- Read simple non-fiction texts with more challenging or specialized vocabulary
- Call on a variety of problem-solving strategies when they encounter unknown words and reading errors or don't know how to spell a word
- Rapidly recognize and name all forms of the letters in the alphabet, including artistic or unusual representation of the letters
- Recognize a large number of high-frequency words, such as "and," "the," "is"
- Understand how letter sequences are represented by sounds and use this strategy when encountering unfamiliar words
- Independently compose a message and write it without help, even though spelling will not be accurate
- Form letters quickly and write several lines of text easily

On average, Maine first graders are meeting and exceeding the expectations in literacy acquisition, according to Moore and Rhodes-Kline, who analyzed and reported the data. By the end of the school year, the typical Maine first grader can read fairly long texts with some challenging and specialized vocabulary, display a variety of techniques for problem solving on unknown words and errors in reading, compose a message independently, spell many words correctly, and use a variety of strategies for getting to words he or she doesn't know how to spell.

Although the average range of literacy performance in Maine meets expectations, Moore and Rhodes-Kline caution that if the lowest-scoring children don't acquire these skills until the end of third grade, they will be significantly out of step in Maine schools. The researchers also stress that the average range encompasses a wide array of skill levels and that there is no perfectly "average" child. Some in the average range will continue to need guided reading and writing instruction, and second grade teachers will need to have a wide repertoire of instructional strategies to meet the diversity of needs.

"As Maine moves forward to implement the Learning Results and outline what students should know and be able to do, the survey data provide a good description of the competencies the youngest students should have," says Moore.

"Every first grader is capable of learning to read," says Rhodes-Kline. "This survey measures skills levels. Those with lower levels need help. It's a deficit not in intelligence, but in opportunities."

Copies of the study are available by calling the Center for Research and Evaluation at the UMaine College of Education, (207) 581-2493. There is no charge for a single copy.

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